

## Community resources

[Follow us on Twitter](#) [Check our Reddit](#) [Twitter this](#) [Digg this page](#) [Contact us on IRC](#)

*courage is contagious*

## Viewing cable 09DAMASCUS252, CODEL LYNCH MEETS ASAD, MUALLIM

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#09DAMASCUS252**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09DAMASCUS252	2009-04-06 13:02	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Damascus

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10402>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10403>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10404>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10405>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10406>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11322>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11323>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11324>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11325>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11326>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11327>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11328>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11329>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11330>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11331>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11332>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11333>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11336>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11337>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11338>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11339>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11340>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11341>

<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11342>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11343>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11344>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11345>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11346>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11348>  
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11349>

P 061302Z APR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6208  
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY  
AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY  
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY  
AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY  
NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000252

NSC FOR SHAPIRO, LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR WALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/05/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: CODEL LYNCH MEETS ASAD, MUALLIM

Classified By: Charge' d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5  
(b & d).

1.(C) Summary: CODEL Lynch met President Bashar al-Asad, Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim and Presidential Advisor Bouthaina Sha'ban on Sunday, April 5. Asad asked for increased U.S. engagement with Syria and outlined an overlap in U.S. and Syrian interests in the region -- particularly in Iraq, where he said both countries sought peace and stability. On the issue of foreign fighters, Asad claimed the U.S. had failed to follow up on Syria's willingness to cooperate on border security, then suggested that the foreign fighters had moved their base of operations from Syria to "chaotic" Lebanon, and later compared the Syria-Iraq border situation to that on the U.S.-Mexican border. In the end, Asad declared that the only way to stop foreign fighters was to disrupt their logistical support, and that border measures would not succeed unless political stability were achieved within Iraq. On the Golan track, Asad suggested that the issues were "not complex," and said talks hinged on the will of Israeli leaders to return occupied lands and on U.S. willingness to facilitate negotiations. The Gaza situation was more complex, Asad said. He chided the U.S. for its unwillingness to engage Hamas, and suggested the U.S. follow Syria's example of "political pragmatism" in this regard. Asad said he saw no point in reconstruction of Gaza without a lasting truce, which could only be predicated on a complete lifting of the Israeli embargo. Palestinian reconciliation was a precondition for the peace process, he said.

2.(C) Asad claimed that the global spread of terrorism and militant ideology was a greater threat than the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and pointed to Pakistan as a particular source of worry for the SARG. When pressed on WMD, Asad assessed that "no one would use them," with Muallim adding that the U.S. should stop arming Israel if it wished to defuse the Middle East arms race. Asad offered himself as an honest broker and peacemaker, and -- portraying Syria as an island of stability and secularism in a sea of regional

conflict -- insisted that his true aim was to improve the quality of life of the Syrian people through increased economic opportunity. He portrayed regional political issues as a distraction from this goal. Regarding the possibility of a new Embassy compound, Muallim jumped in to "clarify" that there are three possible sites for the NEC, and that the DCS campus was not/not one of them. End summary.

3.(U) Representative Stephen Lynch (D-MA), Co-Chair of the Task Force on Terrorism and Proliferation Financing, House Financial Services Committee and the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and Representative Robert Inglis (R-SC), member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the House Science & Technology Committee, met President Bashar al-Asad, Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim, and Presidential Advisor Bouthaina Sha'ban on Sunday, April 5.

-----  
ASAD WANTS MORE DIALOGUE WITH U.S.  
-----

4.(C) Lynch opened the meeting by noting the Obama Administration's emphasis on engagement as a means to tackle tough issues, and expressed his own hope that the U.S. and Syria would begin this "serious work." Asad responded that Syria was "ready to cooperate," and cited the Syrian-Turkish relationship as a model for cooperation. He said U.S. and Syrian interests overlapped in many areas, though "our points of view differ." Asad opined that the "human condition is to disagree," but that this should not stop parties from trying to solve political problems. Asad suggested that further Syrian-U.S. dialogue should first focus on issues "where we agree," and subsequently move on to areas where U.S. and Syrian positions diverged.

5.(C) Asad pressed the U.S. to speed up its engagement with Syria. "We have had only one dialog, with (A A/S) Feltman," Asad complained. "We need more." He stressed that the U.S. must move quickly, for "what we talk about today will not be viable next month." Asad also professed to be a regional honest broker: "When we say no, it means no; when we say yes, it means yes. We are respected for this."

-----  
IRAQ AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS  
-----

6.(C) U.S. and Syrian interests were aligned, Asad said, in that both countries sought regional peace and stability. Where we differ, he explained, is in our "perceptions and in our cultural approaches," particularly with regard to Iraq. Making the case that Syria's overriding regional concern was the spread of instability from across the border, Asad exclaimed that "a curse in Iraq is a curse in Syria, regardless of the status of U.S. forces there."

7.(C) Lynch told Asad that he had visited the Iraqi city of Al-Qa'im, along the border with Syria, and that the flow of foreign fighters across this and other border locations continued to undermine stability in Iraq. Asad claimed Syria had been trying to hold a dialogue on security issues with the USG since 2004, but that the USG had failed to follow up while, at the same time, it portrayed Syria as the uncooperative party. "It was a game," Asad stated. He then raised the September 2008 "suicide bombing" in Damascus as evidence that Syria faced a serious terrorist threat and therefore had an undeniable interest in countering foreign fighters. Finally, Asad referred to problems along the U.S.-Mexican border as evidence that border patrols, alone, did not solve problems. Lynch countered that, in his opinion, problems along the U.S.-Mexican border did not compare to those along the Syria-Iraq border, particularly with regard to smuggling and terrorism.

8.(C) Asad replied that the Syrian-Turkish border was more problematic, in historical terms, than Syria's border with either Lebanon or Iraq. Yet this same Turkish border had a relatively light troop presence, he said. "The Turkish

border is the most controlled border, because we control it from inside, politically, not with armaments." For al-Qaeda " sleeper cells" in Syria, he continued, crossing the Iraqi border was the "easiest part" of their effort. The U.S. and Syria should aim to disrupt terrorist networks within Syria and Iraq by disrupting their logistical support, Asad said. Lynch responded that "a more thorough and constant commitment" was needed to fight the flow of terrorists across the Syrian-Iraqi border. Asad countered that political stability inside Iraq would do more to stop the flow of foreign fighters than any tightening of border controls. "This is where we can help," claimed Asad.

-----  
LEBANON NOW BASE OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS  
-----

9.(C) Asad said that he and Iraqi PM Nuri al-Maliki had discussed the foreign fighter issue at the recent summit, and that Maliki had said that foreign fighters were moving to northern Lebanon. "This is because there is now chaos in Lebanon, and this chaos is fertile soil to grow terror," Asad explained. Asad also claimed that Iraqi officials were now saying that those who still seek to infiltrate Iraq through the Syrian border are al-Qaeda-affiliated Iraqis, and not "foreign" fighters. On Syrian-Lebanon relations, Asad curtly noted that Syria had opened an embassy in Lebanon, and Lebanon had followed suit in Damascus. Asad added he had appointed an ambassador who would arrive in Beirut "in two months' time."

-----  
GOLAN  
-----

10.(C) Inglis asked Asad how Syria and other states in the region defined Israeli "occupation," and what effect this had on peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and between Israel and Syria. Asad replied that "occupation is occupation -- what the U.S. does in Iraq is no different from what Israel does in Golan, except that the U.S. isn't building homes there." Asad reiterated the Golan issue was "not complex" -- Syria recognized Israel "in their land, just not in ours." He said that forward movement on the Golan track "is about the will of the Israeli leaders and the role that the U.S. can play," and could be "solved politically."

-----  
GAZA AND HAMAS  
-----

11.(C) The Gaza track, and the position of Hamas, was more complex, Asad said. Calling on the U.S. to engage and "encourage" Hamas, Asad stated that "negative pressure produces a weak and artificial product." Hamas had been democratically elected in a process observed and verified by former President Carter himself, Asad argued. He pointed to Syria's "political pragmatism" in allowing Hamas leaders to reside in Syria, despite what Asad termed as Syria's "long-term problem with the Muslim Brotherhood." He asserted that Hamas leaders' exposure to Syrian political culture had softened their militancy.

12.(C) On the current Gaza situation, Asad called for an "urgent truce" and an across-the-board lifting of the Israeli embargo, and warned that the ongoing humanitarian crisis was giving militant Islamists a foothold in the region. Concerning reconstruction, Asad said that he favored establishment of an independent authority to disburse funds. He claimed that Syria and Qatar had managed to fund non-partisan reconstruction projects in Lebanon, and suggested that Palestinian reconstruction might be modeled on this example. Asad questioned, however, whether there was a point in undertaking a reconstruction effort before peace was achieved, as anything re-built would surely be "destroyed again" without a lasting truce. Asad said he supported immediate, humanitarian aid to assist the Palestinian people

in the interim.

13.(C) Palestinian reconciliation was a precondition for moving the peace process forward, Asad said, stressing Syria's "pragmatism" vis-a-vis Hamas. The Palestinian track was important to the Golan track, and "this is why we are involved with Hamas." He added that "isolation does not work." Asad questioned U.S. thinking on Hamas's refusal to recognize Israel. "We (the Syrian government) do not recognize Israel verbally, but when we sign an agreement with them, we recognize them formally. We don't have to say it -- it is a form of informal recognition. You cannot expect more of Hamas, because -- politically -- it does not work." He also claimed that the USG had missed an important opportunity in 2006 when it failed to recognize the significance of Khaled Mesha'al's acceptance of the 1967 line. "This was recognition (by Mesha'al) of the two-state solution, and the U.S. did not seize it," he said.

-----  
PROLIFERATION OF WMD ... AND IDEOLOGY  
-----

14.(C) Inglis asked Asad how the U.S. and other countries could bring a sense of stability to the Middle East, so that the drive of individual states to possess weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) is reduced. Asad replied that the proliferation of terrorist ideology is as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than the proliferation of WMD. "Terrorism spreads today like information spreads across the Internet," Asad said. At several points during the conversation, Asad asserted that the spread of militant Islam in Pakistan threatened the entire world and was a particular worry for Syria. He said the U.S. needed to understand that terrorists do not respond to force. "If people think they are going to die, they have nothing to lose," Asad said. "They become fearless. They think, 'I can do what I want with my body.' You must analyze and understand this ideology," he lectured. Softening, Asad praised President Obama's recent remarks to the Iranian people, in particular his having "wished the Iranians a 'happy feast'." He told CODEL members that they "must understand how much good this did."

15.(C) When pressed on the issue of WMD, Asad stated that, "in practical terms, no one would use them, because it would destroy everything." This doomsday scenario would provide sufficient deterrent, he maintained. Asad asserted that the key to reducing the sense of threat in the region "lies with those who hold occupied land," adding, "We do not (occupy others' land)." Muallim interjected that the "U.S. must stop arming Israel" if it wished to defuse current tensions, and said the current U.S. approach in the Middle East was "like trying to talk to Pakistan without considering India."

-----  
PROSPERITY THROUGH PEACE  
-----

16.(C) Questioned directly about Syria's objectives, both domestically and regionally, Asad replied that above all, he was working for economic growth and an improved standard of living for the Syrian people. These aims, he said, could only be achieved by building peace in the region and fighting extremism. Without regional peace, Asad warned, the next generation of Arabs "would know only desperation." Referring to Hamas, Hizbollah and others, Asad said "these organizations we have in Syria are a result of a no war, no peace situation" in the region. Portraying Syria as an island of stability and secularism in a sea of regional conflict, Asad said U.S. actions in Iraq had "complicated" his country's efforts to achieve their peaceful ambitions.

17.(C) Regarding the current state of the Syrian economy, Asad joked that many Syrians were "thanking their incompetent government" for an economic system so backward that it remained relatively untouched by the global financial crisis. "We cannot stay isolated, however," Asad said, and pointed to the launching of the Damascus Stock Exchange as one small

step toward economic reform.

-----  
NEW EMBASSY COMPOUND  
-----

18.(C) CODEL members raised the issue of the new Embassy compound. "If we are to make a commitment" to engage Syria, Lynch explained, "we need to know that you are going to pave the way for a safe and reliable situation for our people." Asad assured the CODEL that his government wanted to help the USG in securing a location for a new chancery, and that the SARG had abandoned its original idea of grouping diplomatic compounds together in a distant suburb of Damascus. Asad said he knew a State Department team had recently visited Damascus to examine possible locations for a new Embassy compound. Muallim quickly jumped in to state that there were three possible sites for a new Embassy compound, and that "the school is not one of them -- it would be impossible." Muallim then addressed Asad directly, explaining to the President that the Embassy would have to work through his Ministry with Damascus municipal officials to ensure that any new construction "fits with the municipal plan."

19.(U) Charge' d'Affaires Maura Connelly accompanied CODEL members to this meeting, as did several congressional staff and econoff.

120. (U) CODEL Lynch authorized release of this cable.

CONNELLY